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AN

ANTHOLOGY

OF

INDIAN CULTURE

BY

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AN ANTHOLOGY OF INDIAN CULTURE.

LITERALLY translated, an anthology is a collection of flowers; and it has come to signify a gathering together of choice poetic specimens. When the joint Editor of "India Speaks," invited me to send a contribution on some topic relating to Indian Culture, it struck me that a selection of memorable illustrations of Indian culture with a brief running commentary may be useful both by way of example and also, perhaps, as a corrective of wrong impressions. If the aim of culture is to set ourselves to ascertain what perfection is and to make it prevail, and if this can best be done in the expressive language of Mathew Arnold, "by acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world—that is, with the history of the human spirit," then surely, a chronicle of the development of that spirit in this country is worth attempting. Inevitably, culture has a universal as well as a particular aspect. There is a fraternity of ultimate excellence which equates all the archetypes of perfection separated though they may be by space or time. On the other hand, the things that are most excellent in the sphere of the mind and spirit are also, of necessity, racy and partake of the nature of their soil. Indian culture

in so far as it represents a way of life or of self-expression, must, like a great tree, be rooted in the soil although it soars to the sky. It involves contacts with life both in the rough and the smooth and to the extent to which it bases itself on aloofness from the yearnings and struggles and the tragi-comedies of existence, it fails of its purpose. The alternative meanings of the term "Culture" are connected with tillage and the rearing of bees and silk worms. It was not for nothing that Emerson declared that genius is a larger comprehension of the common heart. He also described Asia as the country of unity, of immovable institutions, of the seat of philosophy delighting in abstractions. On the other side, he depicted the philosophy of Europe as a discipline. If the East loved infinity, he added, the West delighted in boundaries. It is worth while to consider how the progress of our culture justifies such an evaluation. In his essay on the "Study of Poetry" Mathew Arnold declared: "Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry." I shall attempt similar task within the limits of a brief essay. My purpose—to change the metaphor—will be, to draw a contour map of our cultural heritage enabling the traveller by land or air to locate his whereabouts.

Reflecting on the expression "Indian Culture" what are the ideas that pass through men's minds?

To some it is synonymous with certain religious or philosophic beliefs that have been associated with India—beliefs like the doctrines of Māya or Karma, the immanent sense of the eternal or of the unity of creation that follows from the acceptance of the doctrine of transmigration. To others, it is associated with the dreams and ideals embodied in ineffable monolithic architecture, rock-cut caves and carved pillars and roofs as well as in the Gopurams of the South aspiring to the sky and imbedding noble as well as grotesque shapes and forms, some lovely, some terrible or even trivial but all infinitely expressive. Others again would point to symbolic representations of thought-forms and personified allegories like the concepts of Nataraja dancing the cosmic dance, of Krishna as the protector of his flock capturing the souls of his devotees with the music of his flute or functioning as the charioteer of the human soul and of entrancing images like the Eternal Virgin Kanyakumari contemplating upon and waiting for union with Her Lord. By some, Indian music, as the expression of the relations between the human and cosmic orders, may be regarded as the aptest expression of the Indian spirit, characterised by its intrinsic subtlety, its improvisation, its minute sub-divisions of rhythm and time that nevertheless combine in flawless melody. Those who take a bird's-eye-view of Indian culture as a whole, including all these manifestations as well as the sacred and secular literature of the country, will surely discern certain uniform aspects common to these various manifestations of the Indian soul.

What, if any, is the common thread that runs through all these forms wherein and whereby the Indian mind and spirit demonstrate themselves?

It is always true as Goethe observed in his 'Elective Affinities' that "we escape the world through art," but he was careful to add that art is also our link with it. The close interaction of art and life is an essential requisite of all vital culture. Sir Richard Livingstone referred admirably to this aspect of the matter when he spoke of the 'cross-fertilisation of literature and life.' Religion has always been to the Indian not so much a dogma as a state of being an essential phase of life. In this country the boundaries between the human and the divine were not rigidly established; they passed imperceptibly from one to the other. Not only man but Nature is believed to have its region in the spirit and it is regarded as a man's highest duty to realise this communion. If, therefore, we regard our culture and its evolution not as the embodiment of a dead or half-alive creed but the cradle of an ever-expanding faith, there should be a revival amongst us of the truth that was exquisitely rendered into song by Robert Bridges :-

"Truth is as Beauty unconfined ;
Various as Nature is man's mind:
Each race and tribe is as a flower
Set in God's garden with its dower
Of special instinct : and man's grace
Compact of all must all embrace.
China and Ind, Hellas or France,

Each has its own inheritance;
And each to Truth's rich market brings
Its bright divine imaginings,
In rival tribute to surprise
The world with native merchandize."

Treating of Indian culture, one logically begins with the Vedas, the outpourings of a young, adventurous and joyous race, that gloried in strength and splendour and was not afflicted with pessimism or the malaise of a sophisticated era. The Gods are greeted like parents or elder brothers to whom in simple and unaffected language frank requests are addressed:

"भद्रं कर्णेभिः शृणुयाम देवाः
भद्रं पश्येमाक्षिभिर्यजत्राः ।
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवांसस्तनूभिः
व्यशेम देवहितं यदायुः ॥

"O Gods! may we hear with our ears words that are auspicious; O Gods, worthy of our offerings, may we see with our eyes sights that are auspicious; with firm limbs and bodies, and singing your praises, may we attain the God-given length of life."

The description of a righteous man is typical.

मधु वाता ऋतायते
मधु क्षरन्ति सिन्धवः ।

"Sweet do the winds blow unto him who desires to abide by the Moral Law; sweet do the streams flow for him."

Right through the early period, the "worth-whileness" and the validity of life are the recurrent themes. It is however characteristic of India that as a parallel development and even from the earliest days, there was also manifested a clear-eyed and daring spirit of enquiry which frankly accepted the essential mystery underlying the Universe. In the Rig Veda occur these remarkable lines:

यस्य छायामृतं यस्य मृत्युः
कस्मै देवाय हविषा विधेम ।

"He whose shadow is immortality as well as death, that unknown divinity, who is the Supreme, let us worship."

The earliest instances of Indian speculation and Indian poetry therefore bring before us a people who were impressed by the majesty and the terrific powers of nature but who, without being cowed thereby were able to confront the world and the Over-soul without any craven fears or that self-abasement, which began to characterise their descendants in the days of their decline. The pervasiveness of the supreme spirit and the baffling mystery surrounding it were always present to the Indian thinker. In the Atharva Veda occurs this sentiment:

यस्तिष्ठति चरति यश्च वञ्चति
    यो निलायं चरति यः प्रतङ्कम् ।
द्वौ संनिषद्य यन्मन्त्रयेते
    राजा तद्वेद वरुणः तृतीयः ॥

"Whoever stands or moves, whoever walks through crooked, secret paths or whoever lives desperately and also whenever two persons join together to conspire, let all these know that the great King Varuna is also present by their side as the third and knows all."

Max Muller has acutely utilised the expression "henotheism" to depict the religious attitude of enlightened India. It is intrinsically different from the other word "pantheism" and denotes the belief in one God who is however not regarded as the only divine entity. Such an outlook is perceived in the lines :

एकं सद्विप्राः बहुधा वदन्ति ।

"The one that exists is described variously by learned men."

This view-point is apparent throughout the course of Indian history. The sculptor, the poet, the musician and the philosopher exalt each manifestation or incarnation to the highest place with the sub-consciousness that beneath this diversity there is a fundamental oneness.

Sankara, the most uncompromising preacher of Advaita or non-duality is at the same time the

author of touching devotional hymns to the Devi and to various appearances or incarnations of Siva and Vishnu, to Dakshinamurti, to Subramanya and Ganesa. Illustrative of this approach are the following excerpts from two of his most celebrated poems. In his hymn to Dakshinamurti he refers to Godhead in relation to natural phenomena :

भूरम्भांस्यनलोऽनिलोऽम्बरमहर्नाथोहिमांशुः पुमान्
इत्याभाति चराचरात्मकमिदं यस्यैव मूर्त्यष्टकम् ।
नान्यत्किञ्चन विद्यते विमृशतां यस्मात्परस्माद्विभोः
तस्मै श्रीगुरुमूर्तये नम इदं श्रीदक्षिणामूर्तये ॥

"Whose eight-fold form—earth, water, fire, air, ether, sun, moon and the human soul, manifests itself as this sentient and non-sentient universe ; than Whom, supreme and infinite, naught else is perceived by the seekers of reality,—to that Teacher incarnate, the Lord facing the south, I pay my obeisance."

A modern poet sings :

यं शैवाः समुपासते शिव इति ब्रह्मेति वेदान्तिनः
बौद्धा बुद्ध इति प्रमाणपटवः कर्तेति नैयायिकः ।
अर्हन्नित्यथ जैनशासनरता कर्मेति मीमांसकाः
सोऽयं वो विदधातु वाञ्छितफलं त्रैलोक्यनाथो हरिः ॥

"He whom the Saivas worship as Siva ; the Vedantins as the Absolute ; the Buddhists as the Buddha ; the logicians, great demonstrators, as the Creator; those attached to the teachings of Jina

as the Arhat and the ritualists as works and Sacrifice may that Hari, the Lord of the three worlds, give you the soul's desire."

Kabir, Chaitanya and most of our catena of singers have followed this path which Tagore also trod with consummate skill in many of his verses and his "Sadhana," and Aravindo Ghosh belongs to the same tradition.

Soon, however, by the impact of circumstances and also by a natural reaction, the Aryan mind shed some of its *joie-de-vivre* and became intensely introspective and in a sense more sombre. A profound psychological revolt against formality and ceremonialism was initiated by the Lord Buddha. This rebellion was, however, external and not in truth breaking away from fundamentals. It was like the pruning of decayed branches. Its first reactions were against the facile acceptance of ceremonialism and Buddha averred :

> "Seek nought from the helpless gods by gift and hymn,
> Nor bribe with blood, nor feed with fruits and cakes ;
> Within yourselves deliverance must be sought ;
> Each man his prison makes."

His ultimate gospel which was continued and developed in the message of the Upanishads was thus outlined. I quote from the "Light of Asia."

"Such is the Law which moves to righteousness,
Which none at last can turn aside or stay;
The heart of it is Love, the end of it
Is Peace and Consummation sweet. Obey!"

The great and original contribution however of Buddha not only to Indian culture but to world-thought was his great affirmation that his disciples should not believe in anything on mere hearsay. "Whatsoever", he declared to his followers "after thorough investigation and reflection is found to agree with reason and experience as conducive to the good and the benefit of one and all, that alone accept as truth and shape your life in accordance therewith. You must labour for yourselves. The Buddhas are only teachers, the showers of the path." This insistance on investigation which is common to most Indian thinkers is re-emphasised by Sankara Acharya :

नोत्पद्यते विना ज्ञानं
विचारेणान्यसाधनैः ।

"Knowledge cannot be attained by any means other than enquiry.". Only those who are superficial onlookers omit to perceive that the Indian mind was never the slave of dogma. When crudity and unthinking superstition appeared on the scene, the seeds of decay had already been sown.

• Contemporaneously with Lord Buddha and during many centuries that followed his demise, the seers of the Upanishads, with the double back

ground of the Vedic Faith and the developing metaphysics, evolved a complete philosophy of life, which may be regarded in conjunction with the doctrines of the Gita as a definitive component of Indian culture. The statement of the Chandogya Upanishad "तत्त्वमसि" — "That thou art", the realisation embodied in the Brihadaranyaka Upanished "अहं ब्रह्मास्मि" – "I am Brahman", placed in juxtaposition with the declaration "नेति नेति" "Not this. Not this", and taken together with the other illuminating dictum, "अस्तीति ब्रुवतोऽन्यत्र कथं तदुपलभ्यते" Save through the assertion that it exists how shall one perceive the supreme spirit", embody the humility of the seeker after truth in face of the Eternal which can only be described by negatives and cannot be fully envisaged owing to the inevitable limitations of the human intellect. They also proudly affirm the unity of the human spirit with the cosmic consciousness and they constantly recur to this thesis :

मनसैवानुद्रष्टव्यं
नेह नानास्ति किञ्चन ।

"The mind must perceive that there can be no separateness in the world." The logical consummation of this way of thinking is to be found in Sankara's Advaita (or non-dual) philosophy whose awe-inspiring central doctrine is thus epitomised :-

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या
जीवो ब्रह्मैवनापरः ।

"The oversoul is the one eternal verity. Man's spirit is part of it and not different. The rest is illusion." The final injunction :

अभयं वै ब्रह्माभयं हि ब्रह्म भवति य एवं वेद ।

namely that fearlessness is Brahma and he who is fearless realises the Supreme may be said to be the watchword and the beacon of Indian art and Indian philosophy during the centuries when alone India truly lived. Another saying is specially opposite

नायमात्मा बलहीनेन लभ्यो ।

न च प्रमादत्तपसा वाप्यलिङ्गात् ॥

This supreme spirit is not reached by the weakling, nor is it attained by extravagances nor by purposeless or undirected asceticism.

To offset such an argument, some would urge that the Indian mind has been all through, content to recognise and placate a multitude of divine, semi-divine and malign entities and has indulged in a multitude of art expressions, some crude and others bewildering, that it preached simplicity and oneness and yet tolerated elaborate forms of polytheistic observance, and art and worship. This contention is superficially valid and the Indian mind was no doubt tolerant almost to a fault but such tolerance was based not on ignorance or fraud but an indulgent comprehension of different levels of human attainment. These critics may be

reminded of the synthesis attempted by the Darsan Upanishad of the Sama Veda that the true yogis do not percieve Siva in images or idols but in oneself. It is for the mental concentration of the less enlightened that forms and images have been created:

शिवमात्मनि पश्यन्ति प्रतिमासु न योगिनः ।
अज्ञानां भावनर्थाय प्रतिमाः परिकल्पिताः ॥

The ultimate demand of the spirit was reflected in a prayer not for boons or blessings but that the Supreme may lead us from falsehood to truth, from darkness to light and from death to immortality.

"असतो मा सद्गमय
तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय
मृत्यो मा अमृतं गमय ।"

The Gayatri is likewise an invocation to the Sun as an embodiment of supreme light and energy and the prayer is not for worldly success or prosperity but only that our intellects may be illumined. The prayer is addressed not to an outside agency but to the universal spirit immanent in all parts of the Universe.

यस्मिन् सर्वं यतः सर्वं यः सर्वं सर्वतश्च यः ।

(In whom is everything, from whom derives everything, who is everything and who is everywhere). The abstract doctrines that are expounded

in these precepts and sayings are supplemented and reinforced by practical guidance. Buddha in one of his great sermons preached:

"Live--ye who must—
Make golden stair-ways of your weakness;
By daily sojourn with those phantasies rise
To lovelier verities,
So shall ye pass to clearer heights and find
Easier ascents and lighter loads of sins,
And larger will to burst the bonds of sense,
Entering the Path"

The Gita takes up the thread and resting itself on the indispensability of action and endeavour in this world, asserts that efficiency in the performance of one's daily task is true Yoga. The Gita also demands equanimity and eschewal of differences ('Samatva') and finally points to detachment coupled with awareness as the solution of life's problems. The most succinct summary of the Gita teachings is perhaps contained in Verse 19 of Chapter III.

तस्मादसक्तः सततं
कार्यं कर्म समाचर ।

"Therefore should you perform obligatory or necessary actions without attachment to their fruit or results." The Gita is in reality a synthesis of knowledge, work and faith as the instruments of attainment. In a series of unforgettable verses in the 12th Chapter are set out the difficulties and perils attendant on the contemplation of the unmanifested and impersonal aspects of divinity and

we are furnished with a prescription indicating the various forms of approach suitable to one's stage of mental evolution. The translation of these doctrines into the life of the work-a-day world was exemplified in the great epics and in the life-stories of the heroes and heroines of the Ramayana, Maha Bharata and the Puranas.

The Ramayana, like all the ancient epics of the world, is simple and direct in narration and Valmiki, the first of the great secular poets, brought into triumphant operation one of the innate faculties of the Indian mind, namely, the gift of narration of simple and striking stories outlining life's problems and also pointing a way to life's achievements. Such stories characterise not only the epics but collections of parables like Panchatantra and Hitopadesa. India has been responsible for no small proportion of the world's proverbial philosophy starting with the Buddhist jataka stories and anecdotes of animals and continued in the Puranic narratives. Being perennially true as well as picturesque these appeal directly to the mind of man and child. Perhaps the Ramayana presents the completest picture of the workings of the Indian mind and it has in turn been responsible for the normal Indian attitude towards life's problems. A few examples may be cited to show the flawless simplicity of language and the inevitability of thought characteristic of what by successive generations of Indians has been acclaimed as the greatest as well as the oldest of poems (kavyas).

सुलभाः पुरुषाः राजन् सततं प्रियवादिनः ।
अप्रियस्य तु पथ्यस्य वक्ता श्रोता च दुर्लभः ॥

"O King, common indeed are persons who always speak that which is pleasing: but rare indeed is he who will speak that which is not pleasing, but good, and rare too is he who will hear it"

उत्साहो बलवानार्य नास्त्युत्साहात् परं बलम् ।
सोत्साहस्यास्ति लोकेऽस्मिन् न किञ्चिदपि दुर्लभम् ॥

"O noble one, hope is indeed mighty. There is no power which is mighter than hope. To one possessed of hope there is nothing unattainable in this world"

The Ramayana also frequently exemplifies the expertness in unexpected simile, which is one of the characteristics of Indian literary art

तस्य सन्दिदिहे बुद्धिः मुहुः सीतां निरीक्ष्यतु ।
आम्नायानामयोगेन विद्यां प्रशिथिलामिव ॥

"His mind still wavered, though he repeatedly looked at her, who was shorn of grace like learning divorced from practice."

Parallel with this development in Aryan India was the Dravidian out put of apothegms and philosophic poetry, exemplified by the works of the Tamil saints and seers, Saivite and Vaishnavite, who singing and writing in a fundamentally

different language, continued and in some ways bettered Sanskrit tradition.

We may next pass in review the classical period of Indian poesy. Describing in the Meghadutam the gathering of the rain-clouds in the monsoon season, the annual migration of cranes, the course of the Rewa (Narmada) on its pebbly bed had the dance of the peacocks in Ujjain, or in the Raghuvamsa observing the crisp curling of the breakers in mid-ocean as seen from the air or again in Sakuntala furnishing inimitable pen-pictures of the deer flying from the huntsman's arrow of Kasyapa's hermitage and of Sakuntala's passion for the trees and the denizens of the forest, Kalidas achieves a verbal inevitability which is the prerogative of all supreme poets but Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti and Bharavi also achieve a verbal compression hardly attainable save in Sanskrit and even in that marvellous language not often attained after the Sutra period. Shakespeare and Bacon, Keats and Goethe and Pascal are perhaps the foremost European examples of such a combination. When Shakespeare observes in "King Lear"

"Men must endure their going hence;
Even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all,"

or when Kalidasa utters the truth नीचैर्गच्छत्युपरि च दशा चक्रनेमिक्रमेण Human fortunes go up and down as do the spokes of a revolving wheel—we realise that word and meaning and harmony have attained indissoluble union.

Generally speaking, however, Indian classical poetry after Kalidasa and commencing with Bhavabhuti and proceeding until we come to the 'Prabhoda Chandrodaya' is mainly concerned with the search after preciosity and too often with verbal exuberance and elaboration. These poets and playwrights, nevertheless exhibited great skill in the delineation of human motives and dramatic situations. As time passed, the national predilection in favour of subtle analysis and the preoccupation with minute differences and analogies which were already discernible in the older Indian philosophy were intensified by the successors of Sankara and Ramanuja. The concentration upon words and their shades of meaning, upon intricate metrical forms, upon recondite logical concepts and their contrasts and congruences was one of the temptations of the Indian thinker: and these qualities indeed date from Patanjali—perhaps the greatest Grammarian the world has seen, and are accentuated in Sri Harsha and Dendi and other authors of treatises on Poetics and Rhetoric as well as in the compilers of the innumerable and mutually warring commentaries on the fundamental canons of Indian belief, the three accepted scriptures, the Upanishads, the Brahmasutra and the Gita. These tendencies were not exclusively displayed by philosophers, logicians and grammarians. All later verse and even more so all later prose (as in the romances, Dasakumaracharita and Kadambari) began to assume the form of a treasury of painfully intricate phraseology and ingenious simile and the play upon words. The letter began to kill the

spirit. This phenomenon is of common occurrence in the history of all cultures but was specially marked in Indian art and literature whose exponents forgot that in the language of the poet

> "Often ornateness
> Goes with greatness
> Oftener felicity
> Comes of simplicity."

Running through the whole of Indian culture and Indian art are certain uniform currents or tendencies but one such feature is especially noteworthy. An early French philosopher spoke of the "good news of damnation" and developed a thesis in pursuance of which he maintained that man would never turn to the pursuit of good but for the fear of eternal damnation. According to him, morality was dependent on this basic verity. Such a mental attitude was practically absent throughout the history of Indian thought, which founded itself on the doctrines of transmigration and Karma and therefore never denied the possibility of salvation or realisation to any being if not in one birth or existence then in another. Such a philosophy naturally led to a comprehensive conception of the Universe cherishing few preferences and no exclusions, a conception illustrated by the unlimited range of subjects chosen for sculpture and painting and poetry and the discarding of all pruderies and petty consorships. The allowance for the inescapable diversity of human nature and human motives was thus one of the essentials of Indian culture. If culture be regarded not only from the point of

view of the fine arts but also interpreted as a way of life, it is aptly summarised in the Taitriya Upanished in its 18th Anuvaka where the disciple is taught: "Let there be no neglect of truth or of daily duties or even of prudence or of the arts leading to prosperity. Let there be no neglect of the duties towards parents and preceptors or guests. Above all let there be no neglect of study and of teaching." In the days when India was an effective factor in world affairs, she did not turn her face away from the world and its compromises and its needs however commonplace. Some of her greatest philosophers were like Janaka among her most notable kings and some of her Rishis were great in counsel and not above human failings. The mellowness of the Indian attitude is its abiding characteristic. The essentials of its code are summarised in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in the three words, तदेतत्त्रयं शिक्षेत् दमं दानं दयामिति (Self-restraint, generosity and compassion). And in the first verse of one of the earliest Upanishads we light upon this great maxim: "तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथाः" "By renunciation shall you best enjoy." This profound saying may be remembered along with the yearning challenge of Nachekatas to Yama, the God of Death, in the Katha Upanishad:

येयं प्रेतेविचिकित्सा मनुष्ये आस्तित्येके नायमस्तीतिचैके ।
एतद्विद्यामनुशिष्टस्त्वयाऽहं वराणामेष वरस्तृतीयः ॥

"(Nachiketas speaks:) This is my enquiry: some say, (the soul) exists after the death of man others say it does not exist. This I should like to know, instructed by thee: This is the third (and greatest) of the boons that I crave." They are the compendia of the agelong Indian ideals of life and aspiration in their strength and weakness, their achievements and failures. In fine, the psychological history of India can be best understood by those who bear in mind the comprehensiveness of the Indian approach to life with its inevitable reactions. Its abundant tolerance saved India from inquisitions and the worst effects of fanaticism but it also gave little scope for burning missionary zeal and organising energy. Its preoccupation with the things of the spirit had as a concomitant the growing neglect of physical science and of the arts of amelioration. Its eschewal of dogmatism too frequently led to lack of mental vigour and one-pointedness. At the same time it cannot be too often stressed that in the history of Indian thought and activity, there has been on the one hand no divorce between religion, art and philosophy and on the other, its philosophy and essential faiths are not dependent for their validity and compulsiveness on any single revelation or saviour, any dogma or miracle. Its scriptures and its art embody and portray many abnormal or supernatural happenings and personages but they are not pivotal. Indian culture is not based on a single book or a single Incarnation or an exclusive ideal in the sense that without it, it loses its *raison*

d'etre. A great Tamil devotee apostrophises the Devi thus:

> "Thou representest the illumination of
> Perfect knowledge that leads to utter bliss
> In thee are included all religions and beliefs
> As the sea includes all the confluent rivers
> and streams."

The concluding lines furnish a just characterisation of the striving and attainment of Indian Culture.

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